

Statement by Dr. Reinhard Zinkann

Chairman of the Board Economic Society for Westphalia and Lippe e. V.

North Rhine-Westphalia state press conference, August 16, 2023, 10 a.m.

Ladies and gentlemen!

As Chairman of the Board of the Wirtschaftliche Gesellschaft für Westfalen und Lippe, you normally only hear from me in the political arena every two years. As you know, the WWL has been awarding the International Prize of Peace of Westphalia every two years since 1998. This year, it went to French President Emmanuel Macron. It has already been announced that the award will be presented in spring 2024. Our prizewinners have all been great ambassadors for peace and understanding - whether Kofi Annan, Helmut Schmidt or Jordan's King Abdullah II bin al-Hussein. We also want to hold the conference in this spirit.

This year, 375 years after the important European peace treaty to end the Thirty Years' War, the WWL is hosting the Westphalian Peace Conference for the first time. At a historic location, the town hall in Münster. That is why we are here today. We would like to explain the origins, motivation and implementation of this conference.

The world has come apart at the seams. Putin's war of aggression against Ukraine in the middle of Europe, recurring unrest in the Middle East, civil wars in Africa. These increasing confrontations between states and peoples over power and regions are having a global impact on politics, society and the economy. We see this particularly here in Europe. In this situation, the entire world is organizing itself into blocs that are forming anew. This cannot leave us cold, especially in the center of Europe. China against the USA, Russia against everyone. Saudi Arabia, with its incredible financial power and unlimited energy resources, is making its mark economically and politically. And we in Europe are swimming in the middle of it all, desperately searching for the right shore - that's my current impression.

In this tense and challenging situation, we, the Westphalian and Lippe entrepreneurs, with our close connection to the historic peace treaty of 1648, felt that we had to do something. Our family-run companies are active around the world, and we are not indifferent when people are suddenly drawn into bloody armed conflicts. And we see with great concern that the political conflicts have a direct impact on the global economy, on trade flows, on production facilities, on raw materials and energy markets. The formation of blocs with conflicting political and economic interests in the East and West is currently very much focused on the USA versus China. This may harm us in Europe more than others in the world. This is unacceptable, so we have to do something.

For decades, politicians and businesses have traditionally met at the beginning of the year in Davos and a little later at the Munich Security Conference. We felt that the annual interval between these conferences was too long; we need to talk to each other more often and more intensively. And so the idea of the Westphalian Peace Conference was born, which we are now holding with our strong focus on the Peace of Westphalia, which is so important for Europe. We want to talk about possible peace solutions in the Ukraine conflict, about security issues in our European countries and about what role the economy can play in such peace processes.

I'll tell you honestly, the idea was outstanding. But we could not have expected that we would organize such a high-calibre meeting of important and significant opinion leaders within a few months of our first Westphalian Peace Conference. The fact that we succeeded shows the necessity of such a conference, which we would like to hold regularly in September in the coming years.

Armin Laschet was one of the first to agree to participate and help shape the project. The former Minister President of North Rhine-Westphalia has a decidedly conciliatory and international political agenda. As a Member of the European Parliament, Germany's first Integration Minister, Germany's Cultural Representative for France and now as a proven foreign policy expert in the German Bundestag, he is predestined to lend political weight to our Westphalian Peace Conference right from the start. I am delighted and very grateful to Armin Laschet for accepting this mandate and for bringing important protagonists to Münster with his excellent international connections. He will introduce the content, speakers and panelists in a moment.

Finally, I would like to mention two of our participants myself. I am very proud that Federal Minister of Defense Boris Pistorius, the most popular and most respected German politician according to surveys, will open the Westphalian Peace Conference 2023 with a speech. Not only does he have the highest level of expertise in security policy issues by virtue of his office, he has also come into close contact with the history of the Peace of Westphalia as the former mayor of Osnabrück and a student in Münster for many years.

And I am very grateful that Vitali Klitschko, the mayor of Kiev, is taking on the arduous journey from Ukraine to present his prospects for peace in his country to our conference.